USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries LPCI

Overview

The lesser prairie-chicken is a prairie grouse native to the Southern Great Plains. While the lesser prairie-chicken historically inhabited an estimated 180,000 square mile area of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, the current range of the bird is now roughly 16 percent of its historic range. In May 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the lesser prairie-chicken as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. With 95 percent of the chicken's current range on private lands, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is uniquely positioned to make a huge contribution to the conservation of this species. Voluntary conservation efforts with proper grazing management that includes drought planning coupled with brush management, prescribed burning and other supporting practices will maintain and improve lesser prairie-chicken habitat.

Priorities

The Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI) aims to maintain and enhance more sustainable habitat increasing the lesser prairie-chicken population on working grazing lands. NRCS is partnering with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) to provide a unified and targeted approach to prairie chicken management and conservation. This joint approach improves the opportunity for successful conservation of prairie chickens by engaging all partners. With NRCS focusing their efforts on grazing management, invasive brush control and assistance to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), NRCS can have the greatest impact on private lands conservation.

Funding Source

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

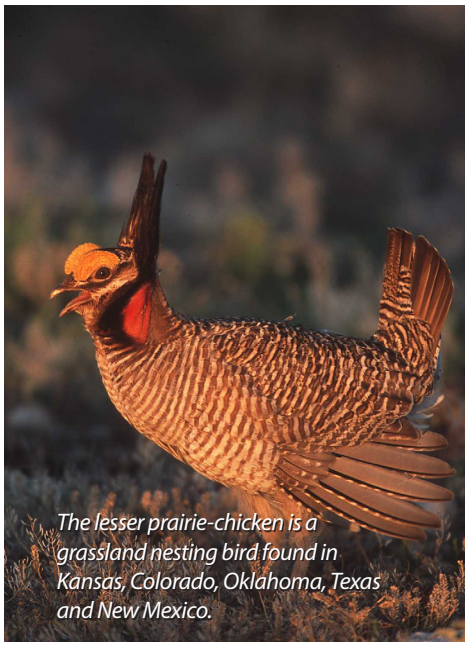
Results

In fiscal year 2014, NRCS worked with 23 producers through LPCI to improve prairie chicken habitat and to strengthen ranching operations on almost 121,000 acres of Southern Great Plains prairie.

Since 2010, NRCS and its partners have used EQIP and the former Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) to assist producers restore nearly 950,000 acres of working lands important for prairie chicken conservation, an investment of more than $20 million.

The success of LPCI has been made possible by a diverse group of stakeholders. Farmers and ranchers, state agencies and non-governmental organizations have come together with NRCS to plan, fund and carry out science-based efforts that are restoring and conserving habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken.

In particular, NRCS coordinates its efforts with WAFWA to assess habitat improvements on land where ranchers implement conservation practices. This information helps NRCS understand the impacts of its efforts and refine them to make them even more effective.



The lesser prairie-chicken is a grassland nesting bird found in Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico.

2014 Progress Report

Helping People Help the Land

Feature Story

Sustainable Ranching and the Lesser Prairie-Chicken: Two Equivalent Ideals

Already a conservation-minded rancher, Bill Barby decided to take his conservation work to the next level by restoring habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken on his 3,700- acre ranch in southwest Kansas.

Through LPCI, Barby made a number of improvements to his land that enhance his operation and habitat simultaneously. The severe drought that gripped the Southern Great Plains in 2011 and 2012 accentuated the importance of water storage improvements and drought planning measures to create better habitat while also providing better forage for his cattle.

Working through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), NRCS staff assisted Barby in developing a grazing management plan that fit his needs and goals for his ranch while providing desired habitat for the prairie-chicken.

"I couldn't be anywhere near as close to getting my ranch in shape if I didn't have these programs," he says. "The things I do for conservation are things I want to do for my ranch anyway, so for me they go hand in hand."

His pastures boast a variety of grasses, providing valuable habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken. As part of this system, Barby grazes cattle early in the season, and then allows pastures to rest during winter. The cold weather causes the grass to go dormant, leaving behind the perfect habitat for prairie-chickens to nest and raise their young. Then, once the chickens are done nesting, he can rotate the cattle back on those pastures to eat forage again.

Barby is also working with NRCS to use prescribed fire to restore and maintain prairies and grasslands. Fire is a natural part of the native prairies and maintains grassland from invasive woody species while invigorating grass and forb growth.

Managed grazing systems, like Barby's, have more grasses and provide more fuel for effectively using prescribed fire. After prescribed fire, young grass and forbs thrive, creating excellent brood-rearing habitat.

With support from LPCI, he also developed a drought management plan – the first step in providing a producer a pathway to sustain long-term healthy grassland and water sources. Past drought conditions forced Barby to destock, or take cattle off, his land to let it rest and wait for rain. Proper grazing management prior to future droughts will reduce the impact to herd numbers and allow a quicker recovery of the vegetation critical to both grazing animals and the lesser prairie-chicken.

Managing for improved lesser prairie-chicken habitat equals sound management in sustainable ranching. These advantages are sometimes difficult to see. A variety of desirable grasses, a high degree of growing season rest and strategic fire are management practices that promote diverse healthy prairies.

"What works to get good chicken habitat makes for good grazing country for cattle," Barby said.

Photo by Linda Rockwell

Fiscal Year 2014 Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts

Region	Contracts	Acres	Obligations
Kansas	4	9,776	$174,138
Oklahoma	3	12,440	$573,828
Texas	11	47,586	$897,459
Colorado	2	11,359	$220,644
New Mexico	3	39,647	$855,872
Totals	**23**	**98,022**	**$2,721,941**

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, January 2015.

For more information, visit: nrcs.usda.gov/initiatives

Helping People Help the Land